

Free to be Human **An Interview with David Edwards**

“Thought control in modern society doesn’t rely on conspiratorial control; it depends on ensuring that the culture is swamped by certain types of facts, ideas and sources.” – David Edwards

Here’s my interview with David Edwards about his book *Free to be Human: Intellectual Self-Defence in an Age of Illusions* (Green Books Ltd, 1995). The book demonstrates how powerful state and business interests distort our understanding of many political, ethical and spiritual issues, ensuring that we remain passive, conformist and uninformed. Activist and historian Howard Zinn (*A People’s History of the United States*) described it as a “wise and acute analysis of the way our minds are controlled”.

David Edwards is co-editor of *Media Lens* (www.medialens.org), a media watch site. He is also the author of *The Compassionate Revolution* (Green Books Ltd, 1998), and co-author with David Cromwell of *Guardians of Power: The Myth of the Liberal Media* (Pluto Press, 2006) and *Newspeak in the 21st Century* (Pluto Press, 2009).

(1) The central topic of the book is freedom. Don’t the majority of people living in the world today more or less have this?

It depends, of course, on how we define ‘freedom’. There are the obvious restrictions on freedom. Enormous numbers of people wake up every day wondering how to feed themselves and their families. They’re slaves to their need to find food and to the society that makes that so difficult. Then there are wage slaves who are forced to sell their labour to pay for food, rent, mortgages, heating, and so on. Earlier dissidents understood that wage slavery really is a form of slavery. If you have no option but to sell your labour to survive, you can’t be considered free. To work for a corporation is to be part of a system in which power flows strictly from the top down – it’s a totalitarian power structure. That’s the lot of enormous numbers of people in the world. If you try to opt out in the UK, you are ordered to ‘look for work’, mostly different kinds of corporate bondage. If you refuse, you will be denied the means to live and can end up on the street, and then in jail. We all have this threat hanging over us all the time.

I have been out of paid work numerous times in my life (*Free to be Human* was mostly written when I was out of work), but I only once, very briefly, ran out of money. It was nothing at all compared to what millions of people face on a daily basis - I was reduced to eating tins of mackerel on bread for a few days. But anyway it was alarming, disturbing; I suddenly felt very much an outsider. We’ve all got that scenario hovering over us in the backs of our minds.

Similarly, political freedom is dramatically limited. As three-time US presidential candidate, Ralph Nader, commented on the US political system:

‘We have a two-party dictatorship in this country. Let’s face it. And it is a dictatorship in thralldom

to giant corporations who control every department agency in the federal government.’ (Interview with *The Real News Network*, November 4, 2008)

The same applies in the UK. Whichever party we vote for, we’re voting for corporate control of society. How do we learn about these corporate-friendly choices? Through a corporate media system made up of ‘quality’ newspapers like the Guardian, the Independent and The Times, all dependent on corporate advertisers for 75% of their revenues (Peter Preston, ‘War, what is it good for?’, *The Observer*, October 7, 2001). Or we depend on the BBC, with senior managers appointed by governments ‘in thrall to giant corporations’. How do these media portray the corporate political puppet show? Unsurprisingly, as an inspiring example of authentic democracy offering real choice to ordinary voters who are depicted as being in control.

But in reality, when different corporate interests are in agreement on something – that is, on issues that broadly favour elite interests - choices tend to vanish. So you can try voting for a party that is opposed to Permanent War against Libya, Iraq, Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq (again), Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Libya (again), Iran and so on. If you don’t like war, you’ve got no meaningful choice. Yes, you can vote Green, but almost no-one else will. Why? One reason is that the corporate media boost corporate-friendly parties and relentlessly attack and undermine alternative parties and voices challenging them. Obviously there’s much more to say even about this constraint on modern freedom...

Our freedom is undermined by less obviously political forms of social manipulation. For example, we’re propagandised by society to seek freedom in dependency. One of the key purposes of modern schooling is to instill a thirst for ambition and status in the young. The emphasis is on competition, coming first, getting the best grades to get to the best universities to get the best jobs and salaries. This version of freedom chains us to external sources of reward and respect. If we believe we need high status and ‘success’ to be happy, we are chained to the people and organisations with the power to bestow these rewards. So we are trained to actually seek, to willingly embrace, a life of dependence.

The great spiritual teachers argue that the chains of society reach far deeper. Human culture trains us to identify with our thoughts. We feel that we *are* our thoughts (‘I think, therefore I am’). But mystics like Bodhidharma, the Buddha, Chuang Tzu, Osho and Eckhart Tolle argue that we are in fact a ‘witnessing consciousness’, a background awareness that is able to observe thoughts and emotions. When we’re angry, for example, we tend to lose any sense of observing our thought processes. Instead, we identify completely with the thought. We say: ‘I’m furious!’ Then we are under the control of anger; we have lost our freedom. Try as we might, we cannot stop thinking obsessive thoughts about the target of our anger, for example. Mystics teach that we can achieve freedom by learning to observe thoughts and emotions – we can watch the arising of anger in ourselves, can perceive the anger as a phenomenon *separate* from ourselves. Closely watching an emotion creates a separation because we know the observer cannot be the same as the observed – the eye cannot see itself. This separation through watchfulness disengages the ‘clutch’ of the mind from the ‘engine’ of emotions, giving us freedom.

Ultimately, identification can mean that we identify with, and act on, every random thought that comes into our heads. An insane person automatically acts on even the most extreme thought

and becomes a danger to himself and others. It is said that an Enlightened person is able to observe thoughts like birds flying across the sky. He or she can choose to act or not act on the thought, and so has freedom from thought.

(2) Why is it that many people in the West seem to believe freedom has been more or less fully attained for the majority of people?

I'm not sure how much evidence there is for that 'seem'. It's clear that most people are striving for freedom from wage slavery, indebtedness, and so on. In polls, large majorities recognise that government serves elite interests rather than ordinary people, and so on. Chomsky has said:

'Not only is the rabble excluded, they don't influence policy, but they don't know what's in policy, and finally they don't know that they don't know. Virtually nobody knows that they don't know what is going on. Well, you know, now we've reached the ultimate. That's the ultimate possibility in the destruction of democracy.' <http://www.chomsky.info/onchomsky/1999----02.htm>

Erich Fromm made the deeper point:

'Modern man exhibits an amazing lack of realism for all that matters. For the meaning of life and death, for happiness and suffering, for feeling and serious thought. He has covered up the whole reality of human existence and replaced it with his artificial, prettified picture of pseudo-reality, not too different from the savages [sic] who lost their land and freedom for glittering glass beads.'

With really immense power, modern culture steers us away from serious thought about the nature of freedom, happiness, compassion and so on. Sensible discussion on these issues is essentially unknown in the mainstream media. Interestingly, some of the fiercest opposition to honest debate is found in the ostensibly 'left-liberal' press: the Guardian, Independent, and the BBC. Genuinely left voices: from Chomsky to Chavez, from Galloway to Castro, from Pilger to Assange, are subject to constant smears by these media (we at *Media Lens* have experienced plenty of this ourselves). The spiritual teachers I mentioned in my first answer, who have discussed the deeper limits of freedom, are also heavily smeared, but mostly ignored.

The media system has both evolved and been designed to serve the corporate status quo. Anything that threatens this version of 'normality' is attacked, undermined or ignored. As progressive journalists know only too well, these attacks can have the effect of making a writer 'radioactive'. When media smearing reaches a certain level of intensity it gives the impression of an informed consensus, which is then accepted as Truth by other journalists. At that point, it is understood that to endorse, or even to mention, the 'radioactive' writer is to risk contamination oneself. This is the case with Chomsky, for example. Journalists know very well that they are ill-advised to mention his name, other than to ridicule him (academics report that they have been advised by fellow academics to remove Chomsky's name from their studies for the same reason).

With dissent discredited and removed from the public debate in this way, the field is left wide open for the corporate monoculture. Technically, newspapers are supposed to offer balanced coverage. But of course nobody even *dreams* of attempting to balance the flood of corporate advertising by

which we are constantly assailed. In fact the Canadian dissident group, Adbusters, did try to place anti-corporate adverts on US TV. But, as their founder Kalle Lasn told me:

‘TV Station managers said “Why should I run ads that hurt my business? We decide what we run or not, we’re trying to run a business. Why don’t you just go away?!”’ (Lasn, interview with David Edwards, August 1998)

The advertisers’ message is always the same: freedom can be experienced through high status consumption and production; benevolent corporations are offering a blizzard of wonderful, high-tech solutions to all our problems. We need not concern ourselves with anything beyond this corporate version of reality. The level of conformity is almost surreal:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GME5nq_oSR4&feature=youtu.be

Under this extreme psychological bombardment, it is hardly surprising that so many people are unable to give serious thought to the extent to which they are free.

Having said that, the internet, in a really unprecedented way, is beginning to bypass the mainstream ideological gatekeepers, and is allowing people to see through the ‘necessary illusions’ of the monoculture. The ‘Arab Spring’ is surely, in part, an early symptom of the internet’s liberatory potential. As was the February 15, 2003 anti-war march in London – the largest political protest march in UK political history.

(3) Who is responsible for restricting our freedom?

My feeling is that, through a kind of artificial evolution, techniques of control have evolved through trial and error over time to serve the needs of people with wealth and power. A classic example is the idea that a vengeful God will reward the obedient and punish heretics, and that He is represented on Earth by a priestly caste and an authoritarian ruler. These ideas have clearly evolved to maximally exploit human greed, fear and superstition. Perhaps another example is the idea that a priestly caste is the embodiment of unconditional compassion and karmic purity – to have a single negative thought about these virtuous beings is said to incur huge karmic debts. How could an ordinary person hope, or dare, to challenge political authority based on this ideology? One can easily imagine how this idea could be used in the service of political oppression.

Similarly, our own society has evolved to persuade us to conform to anonymous authority, to perceive ourselves as free when we are free to choose even though the choices have no meaning. Elites have learned that they can achieve control without coercion (understanding that force is unstable because it generates resistance) by dominating the framing conditions of society. If you create conditions that make it impossible for anything other than corporate newspapers to thrive in the media marketplace, you have gone a long way towards controlling what people think. This has the effect of flooding the marketplace of ideas with business-friendly messages about the state of our politics, democracy and freedom. The messages are vacuous, but they appear to represent an informed consensus and can persuade people to ignore their own doubts, to

perceive a pathological situation as normal. In the age of climate change, this may prove to be our undoing.

On a deeper level, one can argue that the majority of people are victims of powerful elites who (like their victims) are themselves victims of a false sense of identity. They are greedy and exploitative because they identify with thoughts about the world, including who they are. Contemplatives argue that to identify with transient thoughts, to be constantly caught up in mind activity, is to be cut off from an experience of life lived in the present. This creates a pervasive sense of emptiness, of meaninglessness. And this gives rise to the craving to be 'special', 'important', 'extraordinary', which is the basis of egotism and greed that we call 'materialism'.

It is this identification with mind activity – which is obsessed with the 'better' more 'special' future or the 'golden' past – that prevents us from being present in the only time that really is: the *now*. Obviously, happiness cannot exist in a future which does not yet exist, nor in a past that has disappeared. Happiness can only exist in the moment. Identifying with the mind means we are never here and now, and never experience happiness. Not only are we not free, we are in a very real sense not even awake, not even fully alive.

(4) In the first chapter of 'Free to be Human', you introduce the reader to Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman's propaganda model of media control. Could you explain why?

In their book 'Manufacturing Consent - The Political Economy of the Mass Media' (Pantheon, 1988), Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky described a 'propaganda model of media control'. They sought out 'structural factors' to explain the 'systematic behaviour and performance patterns' of the media.

Herman and Chomsky listed five news 'filters' through which 'money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalise dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public'. (Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent - The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Pantheon, 1988, p.2):

- 1: the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms
- 2: advertising as the primary income source of the mass media
- 3: the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and "experts" funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power
- 4: 'flak' as a means of disciplining the media
- 5: 'anticommunism' (more recently, 'anti-terrorism') as a national religion and control mechanism.

Herman commented:

'The crucial structural factors derive from the fact that the dominant media are firmly imbedded in

the market system. They are profit-seeking businesses, owned by very wealthy people (or other companies); they are funded largely by advertisers who are also profit-seeking entities, and who want their ads to appear in a supportive selling environment. The media are also dependent on government and major business firms as information sources, and both efficiency and political considerations, and frequently overlapping interests, cause a certain degree of solidarity to prevail among the government, major media, and other corporate businesses.

'Government and large non-media business firms are also best positioned (and sufficiently wealthy) to be able to pressure the media with threats of withdrawal of advertising or TV licenses, libel suits, and other direct and indirect modes of attack. The media are also constrained by the dominant ideology, which heavily featured anticommunism before and during the Cold War era, and was mobilized often to prevent the media from criticizing attacks on small states labelled communist.

'These factors are linked together, reflecting the multi-levelled capability of powerful business and government entities and collectives (e.g., the Business Roundtable; U.S. Chamber of Commerce; industry lobbies and front groups) to exert power over the flow of information.' (Herman, 'The propaganda model revisited,' *Monthly Review*, July 1996)

When I read *Manufacturing Consent* in 1993, it struck me that the 'propaganda model' powerfully substantiated Erich Fromm's analysis of modern thought control. Fromm argued that while Western society has broken the more overt chains of authoritarian control maintained by force – by tyrants and dictators – we are still imprisoned by 'anonymous authority' which filters what we think and believe about the world. Of modern man, Fromm wrote:

'He has become free from the external bonds that would prevent him from doing and thinking as he sees fit. He would be free to act according to his own will, if he knew what he wanted, thought, and felt. But he does not know. He conforms to anonymous authorities and adopts a self which is not his. The more he does this, the more powerless he feels, the more is he forced to conform. In spite of a veneer of optimism and initiative, modern man is overcome by a profound feeling of powerlessness which makes him gaze towards approaching catastrophes as though he were paralysed.' (Erich Fromm - *The Fear Of Freedom*)

Fromm argued that all aspects of modern culture – media, literature, psychotherapy, moral and religious beliefs, individual ideas about love, success, freedom and happiness – are effectively filtered by powerful interests in a way that reinforces the status quo. The state-corporate system needs us to associate success with high-status employment and conspicuous, high status consumption. It needs us to perceive working as cogs in a corporate machine as compatible with human happiness. It needs us to perceive political subordination to corporate power as 'democracy', and so on.

Herman and Chomsky explain how this is achieved without a conspiracy or use of force, but rather, as discussed above, by organising the 'framing conditions' of society in such a way that they make a particular outcome all but inevitable. I wrote in an early *Media Lens* media alert:

'Chemistry teachers have long delighted students by showing how near-perfect symmetrical

structures can be produced by pouring a large number of small balls into a square box, whereupon a perfect pyramid is inevitably produced. The balls either land in a pyramid-building position, bounce into such a position, or bounce out of the structure. The resulting pyramid - like crystalline structures found in the natural world - looks for all the world like it has been carefully designed; in fact it is merely a consequence of the random flow of small round objects over a square framework.

'We believe that the flow of journalists in and out of the framing structure of the mainstream corporate media accounts, in a roughly analogous way, for the remarkably uniform patterns found in mainstream reporting. As we have shown in earlier Media Alerts, the corporate media is structured in a way that protects and furthers the interests of state-corporate power in the absence of any conspiracy, or even overt interference. The uniformity of reporting simply follows from the interaction of human nature with the framing structures of state-corporate capitalism - journalists with the correct views, priorities and goals 'fall into place' in the media pyramid, while others bounce (or are bounced) out.' (Media Alert, 'Conspiracy-Free Conformity - How the Mainstream Smears Dissident Output,' July 26, 2002; <http://tinyurl.com/6jpph83>)

In *Free To Be Human*, I examined different aspects of the 'pyramid' to see how various aspects of modern life settle within the 'framing structures' of state-corporate capitalism. I looked at how these framing conditions tend to be reflected even in the authors and books we revere as 'classic', in our ideas about the purpose of psychotherapy (to adapt people to 'normal' life). I looked at how they are reflected in our ideas about morality and religion, at how they generate 'Trojan thoughts' that we perceive as our own but which have in fact been pre-filtered by the society around us. As a consequence, our ideas about love, happiness, compassion are often lost in wild goose chases that have nothing to do with the reality of human nature and everything to do with the needs of the status quo.

I then discussed my own experience of the chains of 'anonymous authority' and my attempts to escape them.

(5) If all areas of modern culture are filtered by powerful interests in a way that reinforces the status quo, how is it that books like your own, which challenge the status quo, are able to be published?

Thought control in modern society doesn't rely on conspiratorial control; it depends on ensuring that the culture is swamped by certain types of facts, ideas and sources. So a corporate media system will naturally tend to focus on issues that appeal to big advertisers, wealthy readers and wealthy owners. It will tend to provide an elite view of the world. A journalist commented to me on the huge media coverage of the death of Apple boss Steve Jobs:

'Apple is the middle class toy, without which Middle Class life is barren; Jobs was the middle class's Diana. Drop a few rungs down from Guardianland and people don't give a toss; it's Samsung or whatever's a "deal".'

A corporate media system will tend not to focus on issues that fundamentally challenge the system. This would not create a successful 'selling environment' for advertisers, who would go

elsewhere. It would attract right-wing flak from politicians and other media. Pressure would mount on editors and journalists pursuing such a radical course. This is essentially what happened when editor Piers Morgan pursued a comparatively radical anti-Iraq war stance in the *Mirror* in 2003. His position was deeply unpopular with US shareholders who had him removed.

So the mainstream system tends to flood the market with system-supportive facts, ideas and voices. Dissidents will appear – in fact it's important that such 'figleaves' *do* appear - but very much at the margins. Former Guardian journalist, Jonathan Cook, has commented:

'However grateful we should be to these dissident writers, their relegation to the margins of the commentary pages of Britain's 'leftwing' media serves a useful purpose for corporate interests. It helps define the 'character' of the British media as provocative, pluralistic and free-thinking – when in truth they are anything but. It is a vital component in maintaining the fiction that a professional media is a diverse media.' (See David Edwards and David Cromwell, *Newspeak*, Pluto, 2009, p.2)

Dissident media will typically have a tiny fraction of the resources that are available to giant media corporations. So my book, *Free to be Human*, for example, will sell maybe a few thousand copies – maybe 20,000 or 30,000 copies over 15 years. Almost no-one knows about the book because it has never been reviewed, or even mentioned, in any mainstream newspaper or magazine. Mainstream political analysis, heavily reviewed and boosted by corporate media, can of course sell 100,000s or millions of copies (just look at the shelves of books by and devoted to the philosophy, politics and personal history of an Obama or a Clinton).

Because his work is of such high quality, Noam Chomsky, against all the odds, *has* managed to become one of the most-read writers on international politics. But it's still a drop in the ocean. Almost no-one I speak to has even heard of him. People who *have* heard of him know about his linguistics but not about his politics. As discussed, this level of marginalisation is changing somewhat in the age of the internet, but the power of the corporate media remains immense.

(6) Towards the end of chapter 2, you argue that one way our corporate capitalist society discourages us from challenging its goals is by persuading us that the search for truth is pointless. How does it do this?

One way is by relentless scepticism about all 'deeper' thought and all challenges to the status quo. After a massive anti-Iraq war march on September 2002, the *Observer* wrote:

'It was back to the old days, too, in terms of types. All the oldies and goodies were there. The Socialist Workers' Party, leafleting outside Temple Tube station by 11 am. ('In this edition: Noam Chomsky in Socialist Worker!'). CND, and ex-Services CND. The Scottish Socialist Party. 'Scarborough Against War and Globalisation', which has a lovely ring of optimism to it, recalling the famous Irish provincial leader column in 1939: 'Let Herr Hitler be warned, the eyes of the Skibereen Eagle are upon him.' ..." (Ferguson, 'A big day out in Leftistan', *The Observer*, September 29, 2002)

It's just one article, but it's typical of the media tendency to associate protest and dissent with naïve, old-fashioned, useless beliefs and goals. After the biggest march of any kind in British history in February 2003, the BBC's flagship *Newsnight* programme asked:

'The people have spoken, or have they? What about the millions who didn't march? Was going to the DIY store or watching the football on Saturday a demonstration of support for the government?' (BBC, *Newsnight*, February 17, 2003)

We could analyse this tendency to ridicule, sneer and smear on so many different levels. On the rare occasions when *Media Lens* is mentioned in the mainstream, journalists have associated us with everything from 'anti-semitism', to 'genocide denial', to 'Holocaust denial', to 'Stalinism', to supporting Saddam Hussein, Qaddafi, Assad, to threatening journalists, and so on. It's all nonsense. We've been accused of denying genocides we've never even written about!

Or sample from the world of entertainment. In one episode of the hugely popular BBC sitcom, *Only Fools And Horses*, young Rodney suddenly becomes obsessed with 'saving the planet'. His family and friends are aghast at this new found altruism until his much older brother, Del Boy, puts him right (to paraphrase):

'Can't you see what's happening? You're missing Cassandra [Rodney's ex-girlfriend] – you've got to get out there and get yourself another girl.'

Chomsky commented in 1979:

'It is necessary to destroy hope, idealism, solidarity, and concern for the poor and oppressed, to replace these dangerous feelings by self-centred egoism, a pervasive cynicism that holds that all change is for the worse, so that one should simply accept the state capitalist order with its inherent inequities and oppression as the best that can be achieved. In fact, a great international propaganda campaign is underway to convince people - particularly young people - that this not only is what they should feel but that it is what they do feel, and that if somehow they do not adopt this set of values then they are strange relics of a terrible era that has fortunately passed away.' (Chomsky. Quoted in C.P. Otero, ed., *Radical Priorities*, Black Rose Books, 1981)

Here's an alert on the theme:

http://www.medialens.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=424:brilliant-fools&catid=19:alerts-2005&Itemid=9

(7) Why should we try to understand the ways in which our view of the world is distorted to suit the goals of state-corporate capitalism?

Three major reasons spring to mind: We are persuaded to pursue a version of happiness that serves others' 'best' interests rather than our own. We are persuaded to accept a version of the world that is immensely harmful to victims of exploitation in Third World countries. Also, the goals of state-corporate capitalism are leading to a catastrophic collision with the planet's life-support

systems. It's clear that the greed machine will not stop of its own accord, no matter how terrifying the evidence – it has to *be* stopped.

(8) How easy it to escape the chains of modern thought control or 'anonymous authority'?

It's quite easy to see through the political illusions. I have myself tried explaining the propaganda model to children as young as 10 and 12 in simplified terms. I asked them: 'If a newspaper gets three-quarters of its money from business advertisers, how likely do you think it is that that newspaper will tell the truth about any terrible things those advertisers might be doing to the environment and so on?' I got responses like 'It doesn't seem very likely.' It was simplistic and unscientific, but the point is that they got the general idea and it was plausible to them. So it's not complicated; it's blindingly obvious. *Of course* newspapers dependent on corporate advertisers for 75% of their revenues aren't going to report honestly the destructive activities of the corporations on which they depend (and which may own them, or be owned by their parent company). Of course editors aren't going to recruit, promote or keep journalists who consistently alienate important corporate and political allies, who cost the company money and 'respectability', and who threaten profits. And the company isn't going to recruit, promote and keep editors who might be willing to subordinate profit to principle. And advertising is only *one* of the constraints on honest reporting.

You can also understand the broad trends, goals and strategies of foreign policy quite easily.

Escaping from the chains of egotism – a problem which goes far beyond mere political deceptions – is much more difficult. Obsession with mind activity constantly takes us away from the present, the only time that actually is, so the only time where we can be happy. And so we are constantly desiring something more, something else in some better place and time – something is always missing. So we are never fully 'here' – we always have one mental foot somewhere 'better'. We may stumble on the fact that this is the game our minds are playing, depriving us of peace and happiness. But our response may then be to *desire* to be free of desire! So then we are striving hard to make 'spiritual progress' towards that happy place where we are finally free of desire. In other words, our mind is again caught up in desire, this time spiritual desire (far more insidious, far more dangerous).

The mystics tell us to accept desire, not to fight it – we should just intensely witness our desire, the suffering of desire. In so doing we move out of the mind and into felt experience, which involves living in the here and now. At this point, when the mind has been dropped, desire has been dropped, and happiness can arise. This isn't something to be taken on trust; we can experiment in our lives. This, ultimately, can bring liberation from thought-based illusions and suffering. Notice that this can be achieved without any reference to, or awareness of, the political chains we've been discussing – one can simply move straight to a focus on the spiritual problem.

(9) Why did you decide to abandon your job as a corporate manager in 1991? Was it an easy decision to make?

I built my career over about six years. I started out as a customer service rep in telesales and ended up group marketing manager for a small management consultancy. I was making good

progress and of course the investment in what I was doing had begun much earlier at university and school. I had become used to judging people by how much they earned and had enjoyed a pretty rapid increase in earning power. Jumping off the career ladder really did seem like a kind of suicide. I had no idea what it might mean to reject a corporate career. What work would I do? How would I feed myself?

For a long time, I fully believed I would never have the courage to escape. But the lack of freedom, the falsity and above all the terrible boredom of corporate work constantly pushed me to try and find a way out. As I wrote in the book, I stumbled across Joseph Campbell's work. He suggested that the only really moral life is a blissful life – the point being that a life devoted to greed and ego is not blissful; it's empty and deadening. Campbell suggested that if you experienced bliss in some way, however fleetingly or small, you could follow that bliss like a line of thread through a forest and it would lead you to a life that was genuinely successful - both fulfilled and moral.

It makes sense. Most of the time we do work that bores us, that only engages a small part of our enthusiasm and energy. And so we produce uninspired, boring results. On the other hand, if we find bliss in a particular activity, then by devoting ourselves, we can pour all of our enthusiasm and energy into that task. If we can manage to make that outpouring our life (if we can somehow support ourselves in doing it), then we will be living in bliss. Money or not, status or not, we will still have our bliss. Indeed, money and status become almost irrelevant because they are unable to provide the bliss we experience simply from doing what it is we love doing. But of course the fact that we are pouring all of our energies into something with such passionate enthusiasm means we tend to do a better job than people performing in a bored and listless way. So we become accomplished, skilled and effective in what we're doing. Following our bliss tends to bring the kind of conventional 'success' we have rejected as well.

But why should it result in moral activity? I believe that human destructiveness is precisely a result of the failure of human beings to experience their aliveness and bliss. It's when we conform in the name of obligation, duty and 'normality', and do what we find futile and boring, that we become destructive. Too much really is not enough when we feel dead inside. The bliss we can experience by focusing on something we love doing here and now – something that is not an investment in some 'better' future – is the same bliss we experience when we feel love, compassion, friendliness, generosity and kindness. To feel bliss *is* to be compassionate. Corporate greed is so destructive because it subordinates people and planet to profit. The antidote is to make human aliveness and bliss the highest value in our own lives.

When I realised the significance of what Campbell was saying, it became easy to give up corporate work for a life of writing about the issues I've been discussing here. I walked out on a sunny July afternoon 20 years ago – it was wonderful to feel that freedom. To be honest, I felt such pride that I had been so true to myself, to what I felt. It seemed like an incredible vote of trust in myself. It seems really shocking to me now that I ever allowed myself to be incarcerated in a corporate office, and that other people are still living that kind of life.

This interview was conducted by Richard Capes for www.moretht.blogspot.com and completed on the 7th November 2011.

The American edition of 'Free to be Human' is entitled 'Burning All Illusions'.